

A History of the Lynchburg Public Library

By Ken Morrison

On a chilly April afternoon in 1966, Lynchburg's leading citizens and hundreds of others gathered next to a bunting-and-balloon-draped building as the local high school band piped out the national anthem and politicians talked the talk. The black high school's concert band struck up a few tunes and the mayor cut the ribbon with oversized scissors.

When it was over, the crowds pushed forward for the prize of the day--a public library card. In the next four hours, the new library's users checked out 561 books. In those moments, in a scene replayed in many Southern towns, Lynchburg's racial divide began to close.¹

Lynchburg this year celebrated its fortieth anniversary of that day, the beginning of its public library. In many ways the growth of the library has reflected the growth of the city.

The library indeed had humble beginnings: eight thousand square feet on the third floor of a six-floor former warehouse that mostly housed the city's maintenance department and was located behind the businesses facing the one-way Main Street. It was hard to find.²

With room for seventy-five people, it was staffed by nine employees, four of them professionally-trained librarians, including a part-time reference librarian. But with a start-up collection of 35,000 books, it didn't take long before it was one of the big hits of the city, packed on afternoons by youngsters doing homework assignments.³ It was quite a treat for those who'd had almost nothing before. In its first eight months, the library circulated 100,000 books.⁴

What took Lynchburg so long? Neighboring Bedford has had a library for more than a hundred years, Roanoke and Charlottesville for more than eighty.

Actually, efforts to start a public library in Lynchburg date back to 1822 when a literature

and library company was incorporated by the state legislature and fizzled.⁵ Other efforts to start a public library failed over the years. It was nearly 150 years before Lynchburg joined the public library fraternity.

All that time, Lynchburg was not without a library.

The George M. Jones Memorial Library opened in 1908 through a \$50,000 grant from Mary Frances Jones with the stipulation that the library was "wholly for the use of white people without respect for religious distinction."⁶ Although at the time of its founding in 1908 Jones Memorial Library was trumpeted as the second oldest "public" library in Virginia, nonwhites and nonresidents were not allowed to use it. Blacks were forbidden to even enter the building.

Mary Frances Jones was the widow of George Morgan Jones, a Civil War soldier/land developer/philanthropist who originally conceived the idea of a library but died before the project was started.⁷ Mary Frances Jones was eccentric, to say the least, arranging books in the library by color and leaving a note on the door that the library was closed when she needed to take a social junket for the weekend.⁸

Jones Memorial Library was so heavily used that it started three branch libraries: at the midtown Aviary Building in what is now Miller Park, at the west side Fort Early Building, and at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School. In the 1920s, the library got its first professional administrator, Maud Campbell, who brought much-needed organization to the libraries as she wheeled among them with a limousine and a hired chauffeur.⁹

Dunbar's library was Lynchburg's answer to providing library services to the black community.

Owen Cardwell Jr., one of two black students to integrate the white E. C. Glass High in 1962, remembers the time well. Many of the books available to black children were threadbare,

out of date, or both. "It was a terrible time for the education of young black children," said Cardwell when he spoke at the library's fortieth anniversary celebration last April.¹⁰

Basically one room, the Dunbar Library was run by Anne Spencer (whom the Jones Library sent to library school). She later won renown as a Harlem Renaissance poet and colleague of Paul Laurence Dunbar and W. E. B. Dubois. There is some evidence that Spencer may have trained at the Jones Library, which would have made her the first African-American to use the city's library facilities. At Dunbar, she furnished many of her own books to the library and conducted regular library classes, giving blacks access to books they could not have easily obtained elsewhere.¹¹ After World War II, the entire contents of the Dunbar Library, including books and furniture, were donated by Jones Memorial Library to the school system.¹²

Lynchburg was not alone in providing few library services for its black citizens. Public library facilities for blacks in the South before 1940-50 were extremely limited. Most college libraries did not allow African-Americans to use their facilities.¹³

Not much changed until the influx of northern industry in the early 1950s. Lynchburg's prosperity had always been based on its one dominant industry. Tobacco was first. Just before the Civil War, its tobacco factories made Lynchburg's per capita income the second wealthiest in the country.¹⁴ Then came textiles and shoes. Lynchburg was always dominated socially and politically by the guardians of old money emanating from the smokestacks along the James River's Lower Basin.¹⁵

Between 1930 and 1950, Lynchburg grew by 7,000 to a city of 47,000. In the mid-1950s, Babcock & Wilcox, a nuclear power company, and General Electric, the mobile radio manufacturer, moved to Lynchburg, both looking for expanded markets and cheaper labor.¹⁶ GE alone brought 600 families to Lynchburg. Many of the newcomers were young, highly educated

professionals recruited from outside the city and state. They jumped into civic leadership roles and effectively penetrated the city's closed society. They changed the social, political, and cultural fabric of the city dramatically. One of the results was the rebirth of the idea of a tax-supported public library open equally to all citizens and funded adequately to meet the needs of a growing community.¹⁷

In 1961, an Interim Committee for Citywide Library Services was formed, comprised mostly of college and school librarians, both black and white. Their task became focused when Mary Breazeale, a member of the committee and a reference librarian at Randolph-Macon Woman's College, took the director of the R-MWC nursery school, a Chinese woman, to Jones Memorial Library for some reading materials for her students. She was turned away.¹⁸

The Virginia State Library offered its support to the committee through its Demonstration Library Program. This program was designed to encourage the establishment of public libraries where none existed, with localities providing the building, shelving, and furniture in exchange for a starter collection of 25,000 books and assistance in managing the library's staff for up to two years.¹⁹ In Lynchburg, the state urged the formation of a metropolitan library that would include Amherst and Campbell counties, but both decided to form their own libraries.²⁰

Opposition from Jones Memorial Library came swiftly. Josephine Wingfield, head librarian at Jones at the time, said of the idea of a public library, "Lynchburg already has more library facilities than any city of its size." She noted that Dunbar "has a fine library" and that there were libraries at two Negro elementary schools.²¹

The library committee's other opponent was the city's newspaper, the *Lynchburg News & Daily Advance*, run for years by Carter Glass, who had led the move to disenfranchise blacks at the 1900 Democratic State Convention.²² His newspaper had a powerful hold on the white

community. Dr. Heywood Robinson, longtime pastor of Diamond Hill Baptist Church, said, "The newspaper was against everything that a black kid wanted. Many white people were afraid of it. The paper got its power from being the voice of the community and that's what's so frightening about it." The newspaper ran free death notices for whites, but not for blacks (the policy wasn't changed until 1972). Photos of black brides were rejected and photographers were advised not to include black and white athletes in the same photo. When Martin Luther King Jr. spoke before a mixed crowd at E. C. Glass High School in 1962, newspaper accounts stressed his link to communist organizations. There were cracks in the newspaper's hard line, though, and it finally collapsed with the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s under public pressure from the same group of citizens who formed the backbone of efforts to start a public library.²³

In 1964, the Friends of the Lynchburg Public Library formed to spearhead efforts to encourage the city council to take advantage of the demonstration library opportunity. At the time, the Friends of the Library may have been the only such group in the country without a library. The Lynchburg City Council said it would not back a public library unless it was shown that there was sufficient public support.²⁴

The Friends went to work. Their theme was "A Library to Serve All Citizens." Lynchburg was said to be the only city of its size in the country without a true public library.²⁵

A grassroots campaign involving numerous civic clubs and led by the Lynchburg Jr. Woman's Club saturated the city with flyers and launched a door-to-door membership drive. More than 5,000 citizens paid the \$1 dues. One volunteer said, "A lot of them would invite us in and try to feed us. The struggle wasn't getting in the door but getting back out."²⁶

The first Friends of the Library Board of Directors was a true cross section of the community, representing "old" Lynchburg, its newcomers, the African-American community,

and the business community, with J. Burton Linker Jr. of General Electric as its first president. The Friends published their own newspaper. In an editorial, Linker stated his case: "What we are losing beyond money and losing irretrievably cannot be counted or measured: knowledge, pleasure, opportunity and future excellence."²⁷

In March 1965, thirteen prominent business and civic leaders (all male) spoke before the city council in a coordinated series of arguments for the library. After the fifth or sixth speaker, a councilman threw up his hands and said, "Give those people what they want." The vote to support the demonstration library was unanimous. Even the *News & Advance* finally waved the white flag. An editorial stated, "The Friends of the Lynchburg Public Library are about to remedy the city's grave cultural deficiency. . . . It is extraordinary that Lynchburg does not have a free public library."²⁸

David Rowland, a thirty-five-year-old West Virginian, was the city's first library director and presided over that festive occasion of April 16, 1966.²⁹ As it turned out, the library's opening was one of a series of coming-of-age events for the city, all springing from that cauldron of the turbulent sixties. In short order, Lynchburg's public schools and three area colleges were integrated. For the first time, a black doctor could practice at the local hospital (Dr. Walter Johnson later became known as Arthur Ashe's first tennis coach). The business community also opened its doors: Leggett's department store became the first retail business to hire black salespeople.³⁰

It was not an easy fight. The hospital opened its doors to blacks primarily because it was threatened with losing its Medicare benefits. There were several other flashpoints: a sit-down at the Patterson's Drug Store whites-only lunch counter saw six local college students arrested. The S&W Cafeteria reopened to *all* citizens after a small incident there. The municipal pools were

closed and filled in after a group of black youngsters showed up one day to swim.³¹ Opening the library to people of all races was simply one barrier that came down.

The city took over operation of the demonstration library in July 1967. Jane Black became the first library director hired by the city in 1968. She was succeeded by the current library director, Lynn Dodge, in 1974. Space quickly became the library's biggest problem. The city had provided funds for the library to expand upward to the next floor at its Main Street site. Children's services, cataloging, and magazine storage were moved into the renovated 8,000-square-foot space. But soon that was not enough.³²

The library's master plan, developed in 1977, called for a more centrally-located main library and branch libraries in the Boonsboro, Timberlake, and downtown areas. Only part of the wish list was fulfilled. In 1981, the city council, after hearing a demand for a bigger main library during the 1980 council election, voted two million tax dollars to transform the former Sears retail store in the Pittman Plaza shopping center into the city's central library.³³ With 36,000 square feet, it was more than twice the size of the original library. The new library opened in 1984, and almost immediately the number of patrons and circulations doubled. A downtown branch library followed three years later.³⁴

In 1985, the Lynchburg Bar Association had asked the library to take over its law library. In 1987, the law library and the new downtown branch combined and opened in 1987 in the lower level of City Hall. At the time it opened, the branch library was called "the 7-11 of libraries," designed for quick stops by downtown workers to check out a bestseller, get a paperback, or read a magazine.³⁵

The law library is supported by a \$4 fee assessed in civil court cases, bringing in \$55,000 annually. In addition to serving the legal community, the law library provides citizens with help

in writing wills, filing for divorce, etc. Inmates at nearby Blue Ridge Regional Jail send written requests for legal information, and a legal bibliographic instruction class is taught there.³⁶

Also in 1987, Jones Memorial Library moved from its deteriorating 1908 Rivermont Avenue building to the Sears library building's second floor. Its primary focus today is on genealogy and local history research. Its genealogical collection is regarded as one of the best in the state.³⁷

In 1991, the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Human Rights opened at the Lynchburg Public Library, resolving a fifteen-year struggle to honor the civil rights leader. Ironies of ironies, this struggle had included one proposal to rename the Lynchburg Public Library the Martin Luther King Jr. Public Library. After a firestorm of opposition, the concept for the MLK Center for Human Rights was born. Designed as a living, educational memorial to King, the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Lynchburg Community Council was established by the Lynchburg City Council. The group relies solely on donations and grants to provide annual exhibits on local, state, and national civil and human rights issues.³⁸

Forty years is but a speck in the history of librarianship in Virginia, but changes since that first day in 1966 have been enormous. Today's Lynchburg Public Library has more than 29,000 borrowers, averages 800 visitors a day, and checks out more than 500,000 items a year. A volunteer program established by the Friends of the Library numbers more than 100 volunteers who in 2006 provided almost 3,200 hours of service. The Friends also raised money to allow the library to continue its journey into new formats. From 33 1/3 phonographs and records, it has moved to audiobooks, videos, CDs, DVDs, and MP3s. The Friends also sponsor *Lynchburg Reads*, a community-wide reading program that has brought authors James McBride, David Baldacci, Orson Scott Card, and Sharyn McCrumb to Lynchburg.

Nearly 150 people use the library's public Internet computers daily. More than 6,000 have attended free computer classes in the Gates PC Lab. Through its summer reading and numerous other programs that foster a love of reading, the youth services department has brought in new young readers for generations. The library's outreach program helps many seniors who cannot come to the library.

All this in just forty years. The next forty should be just as amazing.

Notes

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4. Gene Hansley, "Library Big Hit," *Lynchburg News*, November 20, 1966, sec. D.
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6. Jeni Sandberg, "Mrs. George M. Jones and Her Monumental Reality," *Lynch's Ferry*, Spring/Summer 1994, 36-39.
7. Cynthia T. Pegram, "Jones Memorial: An Open Book of History," *Lynchburg News & Daily Advance*, October 9, 1982, sec. C.
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10. Ron Brown, "Celebrating a Marvelous Growth," *Lynchburg News & Advance*, April 8, 2006, sec. B; and *Lynchburg News & Advance*, "Library a Good Reflection of City's Growth," April 16, 2006, sec. C.

11. J. Lee Greene, *Time's Unfading Garden: Anne Spencer's Life and Poetry* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 83-87.
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15. James Elson, *Lynchburg, Virginia: The First Two Hundred Years, 1786-1986* (Lynchburg: Warwick House, 2004), 389-400; and Darrell Laurant, *A City Unto Itself: Lynchburg, Virginia, in the 20th Century* (Lynchburg: News & Daily Advance, 1997), 94-111.
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23. Elson, 410-422.
24. Doyle, 16-17.
25. *Lynchburg Public Library Newsletter*, "Library History," November/December 2004.
26. Doyle, 17.
27. Ibid.
28. Doyle, 18.
29. Frye.
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35. Doyle, 18.

36. Ibid.

37. Laurant, "Keeping Up."

38. Doyle, 19.

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